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A Definition of *University* Teaching

A Perhaps-Swiftean Modest Proposal

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Abstract

"Teaching" is usually used in the Academy without a clear sense of what is meant; the result is imprecise and ineffective teaching. The standard lines — that teaching is a matter of applying approved methods, that teaching is mostly a matter of teaching skills-as-means to some career or whatever — are reflective of failure in the Academy, measured in its "defect rate" of around 30 percent. The definition of teaching I sketch — skills adopted from a theoretical foundation, in turn based on a critique — is well-founded in the scholarly tradition. Understood as strategic, and properly implemented, it suggests a way to address the defect rate. Such a definition is, however, challenging to an Academy at the end of an *ancien régime*.

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It has been apparent for a couple decades that something is wrong with the way we teach in this country. Most of the attention is focused on "the grades", but higher education is no longer exempt from criticism. The most alarming reports are quite consistent: Between 27 percent and 35 percent of students entering the college and university system do not complete the program they enter.[1] That so many students should be admitted, then lost along the way, is an unacceptable "defect rate".[2]

General Interest

There is a vast literary corpus on the subject of what is wrong with the teaching system. It ranges from alarming reports in the popular press to practical and anecdotal accounts, to what passes for scholarly reportage of research backed by significant public and private grants.

The popular press is, *per def.*, popular; it favors the tangible ("readin', writin' 'n' 'rithmetic").

Scholarly reportage is contradictory, e. g.: One report, in a teachers'-union publication, tells us that two-year-college students entering upper-division study are more likely than those directly admitted to baccalaureate studies to complete the baccalaureate regimen in a timely fashion.[3] On the other hand, a review of the ERIC articles database turns up recent reports suggesting that two-year college students are not likely to complete the programs they enter, and are even less likely to enter baccalaureate programs for reasons that are unclear.

The anecdotal accounts are more puzzling. E. g.: A staffer in the thirty-year-old "experimental" college of a selective private university in the New York area reports that, despite higher-than-average SAT scores in its entering classes, students' basic skills, especially writing skills, continue to slide.

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[1] The first number comes from an Education Department study reported widely in the press; the second from a comment passed as part of an Doctorow Colloquium presentation at one of New York's city colleges by Dr. Ricardo Otheguy of the CUNY Graduate School, formerly charged with compiling statistics on the City University of New York, which is typical of public universities, it turns out.

[2] [6/09: This number is now apparently obsolete. Ongoing studies by ACT suggest that a drop-out rate of 40 percent is at least normal, and in some areas that may rise to as much as 65 percent. *Vid inter alia:* http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/retain_2008.pdf]

[3] This is confirmed anecdotally for some of New York's "senior" city colleges by a graduate student assigned to chart comparative performance. CUNY does not use the SAT but sets its own examination (essentially, the technical college version of the ACT); the City University's "senior" colleges commonly set a more rigorous standard for admission-test performance than do the two-year colleges. There is some dismay, it seems, that "open admission" products should be outperforming their own Elect.

The common response to all this confusion has been to develop methods through which new teachers may be guided into paths of righteous and effective teaching of their various disciplines. The ERIC articles database is chock full of reports of this and that method for teaching this or that subject. Quite prestigious universities grant doctoral degrees to people who develop new methods. "How-to-teach" courses are increasingly a feature of graduate programs in otherwise research-oriented regimens.

Presidents and deans make it a point to show up at programs-about-teaching offering words of wisdom about the importance of teaching. The line is, "We mustn't forget, we are a *teaching* institution." In the system where I teach that is a direct and institutionalized reference to a difference from other colleges of the system.

No one ever seems to get around to saying just what teaching is.

The Resulting Confusion

One is left with some disquieting possibilities:

- The entire 2,400 year old scholarly enterprise has been mistaken all along and has never really known much about teaching.
- We may claim, in good linguistic-analytic form, that "teaching" is just a couple of nonsense syllables, absent any referent.
- We can assume the deans and such have misspoken. *Why* they may have done so, we would leave unsaid, as a matter of charity.

I discount the first of these possibilities for obvious — and self-serving — reasons; I accept the last, with the reservation.

The middle possibility is something else. "Teaching" might fail of referentiality. In a highly pluralized society, most people will belong to several social bodies and to the extent these have views about teaching, they may have different notions of what teaching is, and what it intends.[4] If one is faced with mutually exclusive referential possibilities for a term, it seems unlikely one could determine which was actually true, and would be limited to some species of political correctness merely. It might be that people have not carefully thought through teaching, to get beyond mere process. It might be that "teaching" is one of those words spoken so often in such reverential tones, that few folks are tempted to ask just what is being talked about.

On the other hand, one might assay a more universal definition. Such a definition would not be bullet-proof; as an opening gambit, it would not have to be.

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[4] For example, the state intends one thing in the educational system it erects — and it seems to be changing what is intended, if we may take the utterances of political leaders at national as well as local levels. A church is also a teaching organization, in several senses, and it often takes a very different view of what teaching intends. As Friedrich Heer, the Viennese professor of the history of ideas, notes, one ecclesiastical body consistently spoke of its members as "instruments", in the same way Aristotle uses this term; such an organization would clearly have a very special view of teaching.

A Better Definition

"Teaching" taken altogether comprises three general activities. First, there are skills to be inculcated. Second, there is a view of things — a theory — which undergirds that practice. Finally, there is a critique which weighs that theory against other possible theories.

Teaching skills is well understood. At the time of the second World War, it was important to get new workers up to speed in the factories. Industrial education — almost entirely a matter of inculcating skills — became close to science.

Industrial skills training can be replicated in all kinds of places, including culturally diverse locations.[5] Industrial trainers are very good at adapting new technologies to the skills-teaching enterprise. Education in "the grades" appears functionally related to this first general teaching activity.

Students in college need to master skills, too. That often includes mastering skills once thought more appropriate to high school or even elementary school. Even when students have had the best of schooling before college, it still takes time to correct the misinformation and habits learned in the grades. Finally, there are new, more advanced skills to be acquired. It is no longer enough to know to read; one needs to read *critically*. One cannot just write; one must develop one's written work in a logical and coherent form. One needs to elect the correct procedure in an expanded universe of options.

Critical and dialogical capability rest on a degree of understanding; clearly, so does choice. In short, the skills and practices need to find their reason. The theoretical element in teaching has to do with (among other things) why we practice using some skills, and not others.

Skills training in colleges can readily benefit from techniques developed for use in commerce and industry. The teaching of skills merely is well enough understood that the process can be replicated with some accuracy and efficacy across difficult boundaries. Effectively teaching theory, however, is a matter of mastery. Only anecdotes appear adequately to describe putting across a theoretical foundation for such skills in a masterful way. Teaching theory thus remains an art.[6]

Mastery of a discipline, of the theory underlying its practice, is very effective in teaching. Such masterful command of the subject has inevitably been what students recall of their great teachers — Hegel and Kant, Whitehead and Bergson, Dewey, and so on. My own experience is that when I have complete command of my material, my students sense it, and things go well; absent that command, I am lucky to escape the lecture hall with my dignity intact.

Most important, this level of mastery is what sets "real, college-level" teaching apart from what goes on in the grades. That this should be so in the tier-one schools does not seem questioned, though it is in precisely that set of

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[5] Thus Peter Drucker in several places, such as *Managing the Future* (Penguin, 1992), *passim*.

[6] In the original version of the paper, this is demonstrated with a number of anecdotes.

schools one is most likely to encounter graduate assistants (*per def.*, not masters of their disciplines yet) trying their fledgling skills on at least the lower-division undergraduates. The general line — the decanal comment cited before — that tier-two and tier-three colleges are "teaching institutions", is inevitably linked, so far as I can tell, with the substitution of teachers who *may* be good trainers, but whose mastery is limited in degree and currency.[7]

I do not think this kind of mastery — a clear definition of which is still lacking — is possible without a foundation in criticism.

Teaching is by nature dogmatic. We present certain views, for which we *claim* universal truth; at least, our students assume we are making such a claim. We subsume under those general views a whole range of particular cases, which we claim illustrate the general view and are in turn explained by that generality. We justify a whole range of practices and their outcomes in this way.

This dogmatism is perhaps necessary. It is also inherently false, and I think it fails to ring true in the lecture hall, unless there is a prior critical moment. That is, that absolute certainty, that mastery which I have been praising, has to arise from an *un*certainty, a suspension of the generalities one has oneself been taught, a confrontation of the particular cases and modes of understanding through which I come to those particular instances, and from an examination of which my own personal understanding of what is generally so can arise. In short, the question from which mastery comes is, how are these things possible, and how are these means of understanding accurate; why and whither *this* rather than *that*.

Understanding how to teach skills is fairly precise. That mastery of a discipline which allows teaching the theoretical ground of skills and the outcome of their application can be described only anecdotally; teaching theory is correspondingly less precise. Describing critique, I find myself falling back on the language of metaphysics — undoubtedly breeding impatience among folks whose training in philosophy is strictly Anglo-American. Certainly there is no precision in this. That is not to say critique is not understood.

The Virtues — and Difficulties — in this Definition

The definition I have proposed is far from polished. It lacks the precision one really wants in a definition. Still, it has three virtues.

First, this is a complex definition. It avoids the simplicity that seems to attend most discussions of teaching. Teaching is not simple, just on the face of it: We have all had experience of people who stand in front of classrooms, and who just can't make it happen. We all have — treasured — recollections of teachers who changed things for us.

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[7] This is not a matter of what degrees one has; it is only sometimes a matter of when those degrees were taken and where. It is almost entirely a matter of the extent to which one remains current and involved. Say merely, the relatively large generation of university teachers who are now between 40 and 60 appears to have brought forth fewer scholars — masters of their fields — than did earlier generations of the same ilk. [6/09: A decade later, one is beginning to see the beginnings of the GenX professoriate; they may be a bit more interesting, but perhaps more narrowly focused than the Boomer professoriate. On purely anecdotal grounds, they seem far more interested in how they do what they do — the skills set — than in the theoretical or critical elements of what they turn up doing what they do.]

But a reduction of "teaching" to skills merely, and to something which technology-dollars can fix (high-tech is a good tool for drilling skills, presumably) is common currency.

Second, this definition is nicely structured. While coherent structure is perhaps not a certain ground for saying something is true, it is compelling to some degree. In each case, from skills to theory to critique, there is a fairly decent reason supporting the escalation. Defeating this definition means showing both the elements and their relationship to be wrong.

Third, the overall concept of teaching presented this way, having these elements, is accessible. I have used variations of this definition as a route into explaining a range of educational issues with undergraduate students. They sit up, shut up and respond; they ask intelligent questions (well, sometimes sophomoric — but then, many are sophomores…). Accessibility is not a bad thing in a definition.

These virtues are, at the same time, difficulties: The simple notion of teaching, or indeed, teaching accepted as given, without any concern for what the term actually means, is "received". Structure is perceived as frustrating — those who don't like the definition but who cannot defeat it readily, will dismiss it out of hand. Finally, this is not an age which greatly favors accessibility.[8]

A Better Definition Should Lead To More Effective Teaching

Many of the skill-sets that need to be mastered — remedially or otherwise — in college, *can* be made part of automated teaching. In philosophy, for example, Stanford University deployed an effective computer-managed logic course years ago.

There is a real advantage to this in the university that may not obtain, or may obtain only in a limited way, in the grades. In the grades, skills are being taught to students who are just at the threshold of "readiness." More personal contact between pupil and teacher is likely a plus in a "newbie" exposure. At university level, this should be less a concern.

Faculty time — and faculty salaries being used to pay for teaching grade-school skills — can then be allocated to the kind of teaching that simply cannot be done absent the kind of mastery hitherto expected of university teachers — and not so often seen anymore. One could argue that it is just this kind of masterful presentation of the *reasons* for things and for learning certain skills — generally scamped in the grades if only because time is lacking — that can lead to students embracing learning. The result could begin to remedy the excessive "defect rate" in university education, if not actually lead to a "zero defect" educational program.

[8] In the public university system in which I teach, the "mission statement" is commonly summarized as "access and excellence". This line is trotted out just about as often as "but we're a *teaching* institution" — the two seem to alternate, the one following the other in the next breath. As a mission statement, this makes a fine slogan. That such a slogan cannot support a set of strategic goals and tactics for implementing them is demonstrated by the singular lack of coherent programming throughout the university system and — so far as one can see as an outsider in most matters — within its constituent institutions. The obvious response, vis-a-vis the place where I hang my mortarboard is, we are *not* all that accessible, and the proof is in the number of students who start at the college but cannot finish for whatever reason. Part and parcel with this: Our understanding of what we do is far from clear to any of our constituencies — a special problem in a publicly funded college.

Why A Definition Like This Will Not Be Adopted

Whether this definition is accepted as accurate, or as a basis for further discussion, I am resigned to the fact that neither it nor some better definition will be adopted. We live in an *ancien régime*. In an *ancien régime*, what counts as change is constant adaptation of the already established and widely received, never adopting the novel and challenging.

- Increasingly, professional educational administrators run colleges.[9] Their principle fields of study have been school administration or pedagogical method in a normal college, or — occasionally — they are diplomates in some professional area, such as social work. Even those whose advanced study has been in one of the traditional university faculties have frequently adopted the normal-school rhetoric. Most of these people are decades out the classroom; most have never had a clear understanding of the complexity of the Academic enterprise, and how that informs teaching. They accept the teaching of skills as the whole enterprise.

- The politics of the professoriate equally preclude authoring change. The last great build-up in the Academy happened in the mid-'60s; it trickled on through the mid-'70s and was pretty much over by 1980.[10] Declining enrollment, faculty salary-and-benefits costs, the end of compulsory retirements, and the like, have kept a large number of these folks in the classroom.

  Consequently, a whole generation of, say, new young thinking in the natural sciences has not been represented in some institutions.[11] These are the politics of an *ancien régime*; to support the structured definition of teaching I have proposed, these established professors would have to espouse a level of scholarship that was beyond many of them *ab initio*, or to which, in any case, their tastes no longer run. It is enough to teach skills.

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[9] The "natural history" runs something like this: Two-year-college faculty and administration came out of the grades, and emulated the models already in place there. More traditional colleges appear to have begun adopting the administrative patterns

[10] Another bulge is coming; more full-time positions will be created. It is not likely that colleges will lock in a large full-time faculty unless they can cut the costs of such crowd. Even the most optimistic (never explicit, but suggested) predictions are that the large public university in which I teach regards half-and-half, full- and part-time teaching staffs to be ideal. That represents a drop from a norm of two-to-one and occasional peaks of three-to-one. One can argue that the university benefits in several ways from this preponderance of part-time teachers; part-time teachers have a life *extra mures* — arguably, this puts many of them more in touch with reality than many of their full-time colleagues. [6/09: The new bulge, which was apparent from newscasts about grade-school seat shortages, has hit. In the large public university in which I teach, this means a 20 percent enrollment increase overall, a 25 percent enrollment in my particular college. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the university was caught off guard; its administrative systems show the strains and many support-service managers have simply failed to cope. Class sizes have been increased 25-30 percent; gains in stipendiary:hourly-wage faculty ratios — a university-wide policy — have been wiped out, according to senior university management. I have seen much the same situation in, especially tier-two and tier-three private colleges which compete with public, especially two-year colleges. There is a whole different project to be undertaken on the shortsightedness of higher education management.]

[11] Thus Richard Freeland, sometime Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the City University of New York and now president of Northeastern University.

- The world "outside the walls" will not welcome the change. The myth of skills-merely teaching, the vague notion that it is possible to sit the course through and sort of "osmose" the skills, the idea that teaching suits people for careers is attractive, even when there is substantial debate as to what actually accomplishes that goal.

- Skills acquisition is easy to assess; the underlying understanding for such skills is not. Scholarship is collecting numbers, surveying populations, the tertiary scholarship of manuscript collation and so on.[12] Such habits of thinking and of acting in the Academy militate against even seeing the issue, much less authoring changes in the status quo.

This rather dismal view is exacerbated if one looks at two-year colleges. Whatever their original purpose may have been, these colleges now provide a combination of remediation and lower-division undergraduate tuition. To manage the remediation part, a college such as the one in which I have recently been teaching actually has a department the sole function of which is to offer high school level instruction; other departments devote considerable attention to remedial matters. The tendency has been to engage as faculty members in such departments those whose approach to teaching matches this need for remediation. This becomes the outward and visible sign of the expression, "We are a *teaching* institution." The model seems to be moving "upward" in the academic establishment.

In fact, the approach works up to a point. Quite a few students acquire the skills they didn't get in school, and at least the basic data hitherto associated with high school courses of study. They pass on successfully to upper division study. Nevertheless, many of them can finish what is effectively the sophomore year and never have actually encountered anything beyond what would have passed for a good high school course in literature, mathematics, natural or social science, just a couple decades ago.

The conception of education sketched in this paper challenges the adequacy of that model. It means that a neat new program to offer two-year-pay-all "scholarships" for, effectively, community-college programs, and *beaucoup* bucks off middle-class tax bills so Johnny and Jennie can go to college, and so on, simply won't have the intended effect. That is, the *pro forma* patches dearest to administrative and faculty hearts, and least likely to rock the academic boat, won't do a blesséd thing except perpetuate an unacceptable defect rate.

I confess, I feel rather like the chorus of the poor in *Marat/Sade*: "We want a revolution — *NOW!*"

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[12] In its Thanksgiving, 1996 issue, the *New Yorker* published a very insightful essay on the irrelevance of current economic theory and the economists who produce it. The picture is complex, but the gist of it is, modern school-economics is so caught up in fanciful application of ever-more-recondite skills, that all sense of the larger world supposedly being modeled is lost. It turns out that Keynes and his successors were the last of that ilk to have their feet firmly planted in reality — as well as being generally better applied-mathematicians. As I read this essay, it seemed to me much the same could be said for the exponents of quantitative political science, quantitative sociology and so on: These folks *owned* their fields in the 1970s and 1980s; today they are little heard from, and what they present as "science" — as, e. g., in *The Bell Curve* of a couple years back — is rightly laughed at as sheer silliness.